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MARK WEBER

Let's go all the way, Houston

■ Forget baby steps and make ban total

By JOHN F. "JACK" SUTTER

THIS is an urgent message for all Houstonians: In March 2005, City Council passed an ordinance that banned smoking in restaurant dining rooms. Many Houston residents had hoped for an even more restrictive ordinance, one that would have eliminated smoke from restaurant bars, stand alone bars and all other places of employment. At that time, Mayor Bill White stated that this issue should be studied and approached in an incremental fashion. So the City Council agreed to revisit it in 18 months. That time is up, and the issue is back — with a sense of urgency.

Several important things have happened in the interim.

■ In June, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a new report on the effects of secondhand smoke. It received front-page coverage in the Houston Chronicle. The report said that exhaustive studies had generated proof that people, including children, exposed to secondhand smoke get sick. They develop heart and lung disease. They die.

■ In working to improve the health of all Texans, the state Legislature passed the first tax increase on tobacco since 1990: from 41 cents to \$1.41. Similar increases in other states have been shown to decrease smoking, especially among teenagers.

■ The Greater Houston Restaurant Association came out in favor of snuffing out smoking in all bars, including freestanding ones, and private clubs. In a letter to Mayor

White dated Aug. 24, the restaurant group said: "If the argument for implementing a smoking ban is that second hand smoke is damaging to the health of employees and customers, then it is only logical to extend that protection to employees and customers at all establishments regardless of where the food and beverage is being served."

■ The Greater Houston Partnership, a representative group of business and civic leaders from across the city, has also endorsed a comprehensive smoking ordinance.

In light of these new reports and developments, can the city of Houston continue to follow an incremental approach to an ever more comprehensive smoking ban? Can Houston wait any longer in the face of a statement by Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona that "the debate is over — secondhand smoke is a serious health hazard." Why continue down a path now proved to be dangerous to public health?

Is it a matter of personal freedom? Our country has always respected the rights of individuals — until the exercise of those rights causes harm to others. That's why an individual's right to smoke in public places is trumped by the surgeon general's report. So it is not a matter of personal freedom but rather of public health. That is why smoking is already banned in many indoor public places, such as office buildings, hospitals and government buildings.

Some have argued that banning smoking inside bars that serve alcohol makes little sense, because alcohol is potentially so much more dangerous than secondhand smoke. The point is not which

is worse. The point is that a ban will protect the employees of these establishments from the hazards of secondhand smoke. The customers have a choice where they go. The employees don't.

In addition, no one says secondhand smoke is not a risk. Some simply say that alcohol use may be a bigger risk. Now the surgeon general's report says secondhand smoke is a greater risk than anyone realized. And that makes all the difference.

Others say let's wait and see what the Legislature might do on a statewide basis. While the Legislature finally raised the cigarette tax, it took 16 years to do it. Houston doesn't need to

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wait any longer for a comprehensive smoking ban.

An incremental study, as debated last year, might have been a reasoned approach then. But no more, not with the surgeon general's report now a published fact, not with the now certain knowledge that secondhand smoke is hurting the health of Houstonians. So that is why there is a sense of urgency. Houston must pass a total ban on smoking and pass it now.

The city of Houston is ready. Houstonians are ready. Sixty-eight percent of the

respondents to a public poll last month by Bancelice & Associates said they would support prohibiting smoking in work and public places.

The Greater Houston Restaurant Association is ready.

The Greater Houston Partnership is ready.

Health care organizations throughout the city, including the Breathe Free Coalition of Houston, are ready.

It appears that the majority of the City Council is ready.

The council is honoring its commitment to revisit the issue. The council's Subcommittee on Environmental and Public Health has begun to hold hearings on the subject. Prior to the first hearing on Aug. 25, the chair of the subcommittee said: "This is a big step for Houston and the surgeon general's report should help endorse our push for a complete ban. Houston has been dragging in that regard. We need to act more than incrementally."

And finally, it is hoped, the mayor is ready.

The day after the surgeon general's report came out, his office was quoted in the Houston Chronicle: "We intend to be very aggressive in moving toward a comprehensive ban."

So everyone is ready.

The surgeon general's report changed everything. We need a total ban to stop the damage secondhand smoke is causing everyday, including today. It is now urgent.

Sutter, CEO of Sutter & Sons Inc., a Houston-based real estate development and investment firm, is the immediate past national chairman of the board for the American Lung Association.
